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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ANKARA 002097

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/SE

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [TU](#) [OSCE](#)

SUBJECT: RELIGIOUS (UN)FREEDOM IN TURKEY: LONG-RESIDENT
PASTOR GIVEN 15 DAYS TO DEPART COUNTRY

REF: A. ANKARA 2061

[B](#). ANKARA 1935

[C](#). ANKARA 1511

[D](#). ANKARA 814

Classified by Polcouns John Kunstadter; reasons 1.4 b and d.

[1](#)1. (U) Summary: Authorities have given a long-resident Amciti Protestant pastor 15 days to depart Turkey because he does not have a work or residence permit. The pastor has been performing missionary work in Turkey for 20 years, and departs the country every three months to renew his tourist visa. It is not clear whether immigration officials will allow him to return this time. The pastor is engaged in a series of court battles to win legal status for his Ankara church. His expulsion order comes amid a broad GOT campaign against missionaries. He fears the small church may not survive if he is unable to return for an extended period. End Summary.

Police Give Pastor 15 Days to Depart

[1](#)2. (U) Daniel Wickwire, pastor of the Batikent Protestant Church in Ankara, called the Embassy April 12 to tell us that police last week notified him he would have to leave Turkey in 15 days because he does not have a residence or work permit. An American who has been performing missionary work in Turkey for the past 20 years, he is officially a tourist. Every three months he has to leave the country to renew his tourist visa. He had already planned to travel to the Greek islands on April 20, the date his 15-day deadline ends, for his routine departure. Now, however, he does not know whether he will be allowed back in. The police ordered him to depart, but did not say anything about whether he can return.

Pastor Has Long Fought for Legal Status

[1](#)3. (U) Wickwire has been fighting a series of court battles for the past two and a half years with the goal of forcing the Turkish bureaucracy to accept his church as a legal place of worship. His story provides insight into how missionaries operate in Turkey, and how the State utilizes laws and regulations to discourage Christian religious activity.

[1](#)4. (C) Like many missionaries in Turkey, Wickwire started out as a high school teacher. He says he was fired from a position at Ataturk Lisesi when school officials discovered he was proselytizing at home on his own time -- he claims they falsely accused him of proselytizing on the job. He later ran an unauthorized church out of his home for 10 years before opening the Batikent church in August 2002. Along the way, he studied Islamic theology at Ankara University

[1](#)5. (U) Wickwire now runs what Protestants in Turkey refer to as the "most legal" church in the country. Unlike other Protestant pastors, he refuses to register his church as a religious/charity association or otherwise conform to the vagaries of Turkish law regarding places of worship. As far as he is concerned, the Turkish Constitution guarantees religious freedom, and he intends to hold the Turkish government to that standard.

[1](#)6. (U) He has had considerable success in court -- in a series of precedent-setting rulings, courts have supported his right to register his place of worship as a "church." The Interior Ministry appealed the latest ruling to the Danistay (the administrative high appeals court, which has a reputation for ruling against foreign companies), which is expected to issue a final decision on the case this year. In a separate case, the Danistay last month ruled that the Batikent church is entitled to free water, just as mosques are, a decision Wickwire views as a good omen for the broader case on the church's status.

Church Survival Could Be At Risk

17. (U) He fears, however, that all his legal success might come to nothing if immigration authorities bar him from re-entry on his return from Greece. Wickwire said local residents have been pressuring his once-supportive landlord to evict him from the church (he rents the property because he lacks the legal resident status required to buy real estate). When his lease ends in July, he will have to find a new location for the church.

18. (C) The Batikent church is a small operation. Wickwire employs a secretary and a groundskeeper. On an average Sunday he draws about 30-40 worshippers, mostly Turks with a few foreigners mixed in. He said the church distributes 50-100 bibles and other religious books a day and converts one or two people a week. Church members also conduct charitable activity, such as giving away free medicine. His home church in Los Angeles pays his salary, and he collects tithes from members and the occasional donation from groups of Christians visiting from other countries. Altogether, he is just barely raising the USD 2,000 per month needed to keep the church going.

19. (U) Wickwire said police two years ago gave his wife a similar order to depart the country. While she was in the U.S., church lawyers successfully challenged the order, and she was back in Turkey in a matter of weeks. He is confident he could also fight his way back in through the courts if he is barred from returning. But he's afraid the church might not survive if he is kept out of the country for too long, particularly if he does not return before the lease expires.

110. (U) He said it is always difficult to predict how authorities will react. Many foreigners in Turkey can routinely extend tourist visas for six months at a time, or even up to a year or more, without leaving the country. But Wickwire said police have openly told him he cannot receive more than a 3-month visa because he is a missionary. Labor Ministry officials, meanwhile, have told him they cannot issue him a work permit for the same reason.

111. (C) Past practice indicates authorities may not keep him out of the country for long, if at all. But it is possible that Wickwire's court victories have heightened the concerns of a security and religious establishment that views missionaries as a threat to national unity and identity. It is also possible the GOT has decided to crack down on Batikent church as part of its broader anti-missionary campaign (reftels). Wickwire said the campaign has "turned up the heat" on missionaries. Protestants say authorities have recently become more stingy about issuing visas to missionaries or Christians they suspect of being missionaries. We have also been told by an American woman (with no missionary background) married to a Turkish businessman that, for the first time in 17 years of residence in Turkey, she faces an unexplained delay in renewal of her residence permit.

Comment

112. (C) The pattern of court victories followed by bureaucratic harassment in this case illustrates the problems faced by Protestants and other religious minorities in Turkey. The Constitution guarantees religious freedom, and the law does not prohibit opening churches or proselytizing. But it is virtually impossible to register officially a church without calling it an "association." Association status involves onerous reporting requirements and Interior Ministry monitoring. A few Protestant churches have pursued the association option, made possible by recent legal reforms. Church members note, however, that the law does not explicitly authorize associations to conduct religious services. They have told us they fear that on any given Sunday police could raid their services and arrest them for conducting illegal activities. This is precisely the situation Wickwire has been striving to avoid. Now his fate rests on whether immigration officials allow him to return and continue his efforts.

EDELMAN